

## Playwork goes to School:

### Professional (mis)recognition and playwork practice in primary school.

#### Abstract

The article considers some of the key contemporary challenges facing playwork professionals in England when working in interagency and inter-professional contexts, specifically in English primary schools. This paper is based on a small-scale qualitative evaluation of a pilot play project situated within a primary school in a large English town. By drawing on broader debates within sociological literature and interview and observational data, this paper provides insights into the gendered, classed and interprofessional discourses that are in play within a new phase of the austere economic and occupational public sector landscape. Drawing on concepts of 'misrecognition', the authors' explore issues of professional power, the process of professionalisation and how aspects such as gender and status shape contemporary inter-professional dynamics in schools and playwork contexts.

Keywords: Playwork; professionalism; misrecognition, role models; inter-professional culture; austerity.

#### Introduction

Post-recession austerity public policy has seen a detrimental effect on play provision in England. This has included cuts to state funding for play and play services (Play England 2011; CYP Now 2014), the questioning of the value of play for school age children (Smith 2010; Kane 2015), the reconfiguration of play space provision away from public landscapes into formal and institutional settings (McKendrick et al. 2015; Woolley 2015) and cuts to the number of play professionals (Gill 2015). The standards agenda, which focuses on attainment and global competitiveness (Ainslow et al. 2006), has also influenced the English educational system and professionals in terms of limiting the ways and time in which children 'play' or explore and learn from a variety of experiences and situations (Davy 2007).

This paper intends to contribute to understandings of playwork as a professional practice in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly the role of playwork for children aged from 5–7 years in England. As a profession, the role of playworkers' *'to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play'* (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2004 [online]) and playwork has gained some recognition for contributing to the physical, social, cognitive, and emotional well-being of children and youth in both informal and institutional settings throughout England (Russell 2011). This article, through the use of a case study, considers some of the contemporary challenges facing

playwork professionals in England when working in interagency and inter-professional contexts, specifically in English primary schools. It aims to provide some insights into how the austerity programme and the transformation of playwork, as a non-statutory service, has impacted both the practice context and professional dynamics within a primary school.

The article is based on a small-scale evaluation conducted within an English primary school. The study examined how the school community and professional groupings engaged with playwork as a concept, and how it fitted into a formal classroom setting. The research used qualitative data to analyse the experiences of playworkers, teachers and pupils who participated in the pilot project as well as the capacity of playwork to supplement formal settings with new modes of professional distinction. Although the findings are limited to one school, they begin to illuminate the role of gender and social class in the construction of playworkers' professional identities, and the impact to playwork of moving into 'educational' spaces. The findings also raise questions over whether 'play' is likely to be recognised as a 'serious' activity in an austere economic and occupational public sector landscape. Thus, this article has implications for understanding playwork in institutional settings and raises broader questions about some of the gendered and inter-professional dynamics of professionalism in primary schools.

### **Playwork and professionalism**

Playwork is an internationally recognised practice which takes on a variety of forms worldwide<sup>1</sup>, embracing a range of therapeutic, advocacy and educational guises within playgrounds and other children's settings (Kane 2015). Within England and the UK it is a child-centred practice aimed at working with children and young people aged 0-13. Playworkers' are trained to support child development by enriching children's play and acting as a resource or providing new stimulus, such as music or props, in order to encourage new experiences. Play 'work' is characterised as 'low intervention, high response', and typically takes place in play-centres, parks, out-of-school clubs and specialised settings, such as hospitals. The core of playwork practice is the centrality of play as both a right and necessity for all children:

*'The playwork profession is rooted in a belief that play is of immense benefit, and that society has a responsibility to ensure children get the most out of their play.'* (Brown 2009, 1)

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<sup>1</sup>Playwork is recognised to a greater or lesser extent in the UK, Ireland, Denmark, and across other European contexts as well as Australia and the USA (see Miller and Almon 2011).

One of the challenges of playwork itself is that of 'play'. As Moyles (2010, 14) notes: *'Play seems to suffer by everyone apparently knowing what it is in terms of children's activities but no one being absolutely convinced how much children learn from their play experiences.'*

Play's ambiguity makes it difficult to define. Play is expressive, creative and potentially subversive and often has a purpose of its own, rather than for wider action and agendas (Sicart 2014). Play itself is seen to be the sole preserve of early childhood somehow apart from 'education' and 'work', and yet play itself is not the preserve of the very young. While it can be, and often is, harnessed for formalised pedagogical ends, the very breadth of play as a cultural form and practice defies easy definition and categorisation. Such ambiguity of purpose leads experts in play to arguably have a less serious, established and respected status amongst other professions. Play is thus at risk of being subordinated to formal learning and adult-led activities, after children have finished their 'work' (Moyles 2010). An individual's sense of themselves in the field of playwork therefore becomes increasingly dependent on context. In institutions, such as primary schools (Woolley 2015), such identity work is distilled through the paradigms and power dynamics considered fundamental to the formation of vocational identity in formal settings (Lahiff 2015).

Since playwork's origins in the adventure playgrounds of the 1960s, it was policymakers' interest in developing out-of-school childcare in the 2000's that assisted in making important advances towards what could be called the professionalisation of playwork. Indeed, the sector skills council for the profession in the United Kingdom views, *'Playwork as a highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play but is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes'* (SkillsActive 2014 [online]). Despite the kind of structures that could enable it to become a recognised profession, such as the establishment of national occupational standards, training and University based professional qualifications<sup>2</sup>, playwork, and by implication, playworkers have achieved a relatively weak position on the division of labour. The reasons for playwork's weak occupational status are now briefly explored.

Extensive sociological work has considered the nature and status of the professional and professionalisation (Greenwood 1957; Millerson 1964; Etzioni 1969; Eraut 1994; Whitty 2000; Evetts 2003; 2011). Greenwood (1957) identified five key traits of professionalism which included: *a systematic body of knowledge; professional authority and credibility; community sanction and regulation and control of its members; a professional code of ethics; a professional culture of values, norms and symbols*. Such a list supports the status ascribed to the 'old' established professions, such

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, there is only one undergraduate degree course in the UK for those wishing to enter playwork. Many practitioners are now trained via a limited number of competence based vocational routes and 'on the job' training. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Pedagogy, Culture and Society on 27 December 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2017.1421569>.

as medicine and law, but these markers also support 'new' professions, such as the professional identity of social work. However, the limited parameters also highlights the relative precarity in recognition, status and economic award of newer, para-professions in education and welfare.

While scholarly work has focused on defining the 'professional', Evetts (2003) argues that it may be more productive to consider how concepts of professionalism are mobilised to acquire power and their relative appeal and relationships to political elites, other occupational groups and institutional and vocational knowledge (Evetts 2003; 2011). Indeed, Evetts (2011) suggests that recent decades have seen the emergence of new organisational contexts, and as a result, the recognition of 'new' professionals. These policy and organisational contexts are associated with increased bureaucracy, new processes of control of work and workers, and the erosion of traditional notions of professional expertise. Such processes highlight the potential limits of professional autonomy and expert power, as it remains the state that retains the primary capacity to grant the kinds of autonomy in relation to both power and authority that these occupations (or 'new professions') might seek.

Discourses of professionalism are also those of institutional, organisational and state power, which are replete with gendered and class status (Skeggs 1997; Colley 2006; Osgood 2009; 2010; 2012) and reproduce hierarchical, hegemonic constructions of work, worth and the subordination and non-recognition of domestic and emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). While English playworkers, and other child and youth based professions may have their own culture, values and norms, they are not nationally registered. They also do not have a protected status via ascribed professional authority and regulation, due to the low status and pay afforded to those that work within the feminised and classed realms of care (Osgood 2009).

### **Playwork and professional (mis) recognition**

One key theoretical term that frames this paper is that of recognition. We look at this term now in order to understand the complexities and challenges of practices that span disciplinary spaces, both in theoretical and concrete terms. The *very* ambiguity of play (Sutton-Smith 2009) as a practice produces key challenges for its recognition and status. By considering the challenges of bringing the informal and non-formal into institutional spaces, such as the literacy classroom, highlights the complexities in recognising and ascribing status to both the practice and practitioners.

Nancy Fraser (1995; 2000), in her exploration of social justice, argues that to be misrecognised is not about simple rejection such as a devaluing of skills, but moreover, it is a broader institutionalised disesteem that impedes the parity of participation (1995, 280). In this we see commonalities with

Evvett's (2003) view that structural and institutionalised hierarchies of esteem and professional practice produce and cast new 'professionals' as marginal and liminal. Indeed Fraser (2000) argues:

*'To be misrecognized, accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.'* (p113)

James (2015) highlights the similarities and differences in both Fraser's and Bourdieu's use of the notion of 'misrecognition' and examines how both conceptualisations are often conflated within educational research. James emphasises that while Fraser is interested in institutional status, issues of justice and economic redistribution, Bourdieu focuses on the realm of social practice within a field.

*'For Bourdieu, then, misrecognition refers to an everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognised for what it is because it was not previously 'cognised' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it.'* (James 2015, 100)

Indeed, in reflecting on the rendering of social practices as intelligible within specific contexts, James highlights how Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence has some strong similarities with Fraser's concept of misrecognition.

Professional misrecognition might be seen as a contestation of claims to 'expertise' and thus may lead to marginalisation and limited engagement with new professions' calls for resources and institutional legitimisation by policymakers, funders, agencies and other fellow established professionals. Moreover, the subordinated (and non-statutory) professional may have their agenda subsumed, cultures and practices marginalised and these professionals would be compelled to adapt to dominant traditions or potentially disappear. Bourdieu's approach to power and domination, as culturally and symbolically created, is particularly useful here, in order to analyse power in the development and change processes created between professions in institutional spaces.

This struggle for domination is perhaps most amplified where professions work closely together in formal spaces, such as classrooms. Such spaces have traditionally only offered symbolic value to certain codes of conduct and rituals (as a form of cultural capital) associated with teaching as a profession. Rituals include the acquisition of specific knowledge and pedagogic skills, gained by formal postgraduate training, and learned modes of being, such as ways of talking, acting and dressing (smart) that make a teacher identifiable when they are with pupils. These forms of capital bear the 'mark of

professionalism' and offer the bearer symbolic capital or status, which enable individuals to position themselves as authority figures in a classroom setting. Being recognised as a professional in this context contributes to transforming cultural capitals into symbolic capital and enables holders to potentially exercise domination and create hierarchies in social relationships (Bourdieu 1984). Thus, for Bourdieu, forms of capital gain their meaning through a relational play of differences in the field; social space is in the end a space of differences (Bourdieu 1984, 28 in Schinkel et al 2011). In a real sense, a lack of capital, as well as its possession, positions people.

Playworkers' may therefore hold a weak position in the division of labour. This is because their professional (cultural) practices are likely to hold a lowly status in comparison to the professional identity, expertise and recognition on offer to more established child and welfare and statutory practitioners, such as teachers. This may (as we now discuss) impact on their capacity to self-advocate and survive the exacting austerity cuts that have shaped public services in the UK in the past decade.

### **Marginalisation of playwork in policy and practice**

Since 2010, an arguably ideological driven policy of austerity has seen substantial funding cuts to non-statutory services<sup>3</sup> and the deprioritisation of the playwork sector for children and young people in England (see NYA 2016; Unison 2016). These budgetary restrictions must also be understood in the context of disparate cuts, through subsequent Government spending reviews, to public services for children and young people without proper consideration of how they will be affected (O'Hara 2014; Main 2014; UNCRC 2016). That current policy directed at play is not a UK government priority does not bode well for playwork as a profession and play as a whole, despite evidence of the benefits gained from play (McNeill 2006; Play England 2007; Matthews et al. 2011). In the contemporary political and socio-economic context, the future of playwork remains precarious. Indeed, as a non-statutory service lacking professional power, playwork remains especially vulnerable to broader public sector cuts.

In such a challenging environment, playwork agencies diversified their offers in order to raise revenue, and this has included increased work within formal settings such as schools. At first glance, classrooms might provide a unique setting to foster the kind of play that can lead to cognitive and social maturity. For example, it is a setting that can be organised to accommodate imaginative play. However, the extent to which pupils' play can be appropriately supported by teachers is complex. Prior research in early years and primary settings exploring teachers' approaches have found that while play is seen as an essential learning tool it is often marginalised in relation to teaching. Indeed, scholars have noted

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<sup>3</sup> In a 2014 report, between 2010-2013 62% of councils reported cuts in playwork staffing with 22% stated that they no longer employ any play staff. (CYP Now 2014).

a clear difference between rhetoric regarding the importance of play in school and its sublimation beneath more adult-led, teacher-centred and easily assessed activities (Wood and Bennett 1997; McInnes et al. 2011; Yang 2013; Kane 2015). With their own unique blend of knowledge, skills and experience, playworkers are thus perhaps best placed to offer freely chosen, self-directed play in a range of children's settings.

Such challenges face other liminal incipient professionals such as youth workers (Bradford 2007). In common with playworkers, many state funded youth workers in England have accepted redundancy or a shift into short, targeted and formalised work in schools and social work settings (Youdell and McGimpsey 2015; Ofsted 2015). In such contexts, youth workers are used as a solution to a range of expressions of professional and national concern, particularly those of young men. This is because youth workers' relational skills and individualised practices are seen as suitable tools in engaging and building rapport with unruly males, in order to support the 'real work' of the social worker or teacher as the true 'professional' (Hall 2013; Gormally 2015). The youth work agenda has thus become subsumed beneath dominant professional practices and concerns. These issues also reflect broader policy and professional debates in schools, such as the perceived need to rescue 'failing' boys from the apparent feminisation of primary education (see Epstein 1999; Francis 1999; 2000; Skelton 2001; 2003; Mills et al. 2008; Martino 2008; Brownhill 2014). The crucial task for playwork and playworkers is to engage in a productive inter-professional dialogue, which recognises and respects the differing professional cultures, values and traditions, without replicating damaging historical professional, institutional and gendered hierarchies.

With this in mind, we consider what tensions emerge as a result of playwork going to school. In particular, the paper explores how the increased role of new groups of para-professionals in one primary school opens up questions of professional judgement, negotiations of shared practice and notions of professional culture for and between playworkers, children and teachers in the classroom.

## **Research Background**

This research originated from a small-scale evaluation into how a primary school community and professional groupings engaged with playwork as a concept and practice. The evaluation also looked at how playwork fitted in to a formal classroom experience in order to assess how it might be utilised within the wider formal aspects of the primary school education. The setting was a midsize school for children aged 5-11 years old and served a multi-ethnic, economically disadvantaged area in a large town in the South of England. As the evaluation proceeded, it became clear that such an initiative

created new formations, configurations and challenges to professional power within institutional contexts, which forms the focus of this paper.

This case study was part of a small-scale evaluation for an English local authority of a schools-based playwork initiative that took place in the spring of 2015. The study used an interpretive case study framework to examine the research questions. This allowed researchers to conduct explorations of multi-faceted social phenomena, through detailed contextual analysis, with only a limited number of subjects (Yin 2003). Qualitative methods were used in an effort to better understand if and how the playwork project might provide (new) opportunities for the engagement and development of primary school children. The primary school studied afforded logistical support for the research efforts for this evaluation. The study followed the British Educational Research Association's (2011) guidance and secured ethics approval from the University's ethical committee prior to conducting research. All locations, agencies and individual identities have been anonymised.

Playworkers were established in the school before the study, providing playground activities and sports sessions. From October 2014 - February 2015 a team of playworkers were based in the classroom for three days' per week offering support, including individual and group work activities for Year 4 pupils (eight and nine years' old). The play association had a full-time manager, a small number of full time staff, but most staff were casually employed for specific projects. The predominately young male staff team came from a range of practice backgrounds including sports coaching, drama, play and youth work. Data included focus groups and semi structured interviews with the playwork manager, classroom-based playworkers, teachers and pupils. In all, there were six site visits by research staff, six interviews and four focus groups. Purposive sampling methods guided participant recruitment (Lincoln and Guba 1985). After consulting with the playwork manager and head teacher, staff were recruited that had worked closely together in the classroom and could offer up a diversity of experience about the pilot project. Similarly, twelve Year 4 pupils (five males and seven females) participated in the focus group. Information about the evaluation was provided to staff and parents who discussed this with pupils, so they felt informed about the purpose and nature of the evaluation (Rogers and Ludhra 2012). Informed consent from all participants was gained prior to the evaluation. Interview and focus group questions were semi-structured and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The purpose was to explore experiences and perceptions of playworkers in the classroom and the relations between teachers, playworkers and pupils in supporting learning.

Data also included unstructured observations of six sessions of up to three hours' duration, including classroom and small group based activities, between classroom-based playworkers, teachers and pupils. Observations focused on the activities and approaches used by playworkers and on practice



dilemmas in trying to enhance pupil engagement in the classroom. From observations it was noted that, compared to the mandatory smart-casual dress of teachers, playworkers' uniforms were primarily sportswear with the logo of the local play association prominently displayed.

An interesting gendered dynamic to the sample was also apparent. Reflecting the gendered workforce in the field site, the school-based teaching participants in this study were all female. While playwork as a profession is largely female, the play staff involved in the initiative providing targeted individual, group sessions and classroom-based initiatives for pupils in the school were all male workers in their early twenties. These observations are noteworthy as this meant that playworkers' identity in relation to their gender, age, dress, presentation of self, and mode of interaction, was visibly distinct from teaching staff, and whilst not representative of playwork as a whole. This study reflects some of arising gendered dynamics in introducing a male playwork staff team into a conventional primary school setting, which is manifested primarily within the data in terms of male playworkers being constituted on the basis of largely essentialised gendered attributes articulated within the participants' accounts. However, this is not to imply that a more nuanced understanding of gender, or the dilemmas faced by professionals in primary schools, does not exist beyond the data presented here.

A heuristic approach to analysis was conducted to capture an emerging picture of the intervention and also to explore related and diverse aspects of the experience of playwork in formal settings. These perspectives were elicited from the voices and actions of participants throughout the research process. Despite time constraints, and where possible, these perceptions were developed through focus group discussions (Morgan 2007). All data were fully transcribed and thematically analysed and coded for emerging themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). From the process of coding and analysis, two themes emerged that seemed to explicate the key elements shaping the experience of playworkers and the (mis) recognition of playwork in the classroom:

- (i) *Playworker as role model,*
- (ii) *Playworker as 'spark plug'.*

We are mindful that data presented here is representative only of the school-based context presented. Nevertheless, we argue that such insights suggest there are issues around how play is operationalised within professional and practice contexts, and how these have been shaped by issues of gender, status, professionalism and (mis)recognition. We also argue that by taking the theoretical and empirical engagement a step further, we begin to illuminate how these issues are also shaped by broader fiscal and political contexts in a post-austerity landscape, where the development of new practice dynamics is likely to become ever more prevalent and worthy of wider academic attention.

**(i) Playworker as role model: ‘They naturally seem to know what to do’**

The ambiguity of play as a professional practice produces key challenges for the recognition and status of playwork, particularly when located in formal institutional settings. While playworkers had been engaged in the locality, offering out-of-class play activities in break times, and sports interventions as after school projects, the move to specific formalised individual and group based in-class support, including for literacy and numeracy, was a new development. Within these classroom-based activities, the playworkers’ role differed in relation to aspects such as voluntary engagement and professional judgement, with playworkers taking specific instruction from the class teacher. This quote from a playworker interview provides insights into the initial tension with regard to the evolution of playwork in the school, which seemed to be perceived as ‘very different to play’.

*‘(Play in school is) very different stuff (than) we normally do...it’s kind of basically like being a teaching assistant, another teaching assistant really’. (Playworker - group interview)*

As playworkers were largely employed on a sessional basis, there was rarely sufficient time for practitioners to pre-plan classroom activities with teachers, neither was there time to establish a working relationship or to discuss a common understanding of the play approach between teachers, teaching assistants and playworkers in class. This meant that teachers’ felt they were not aware of the professional ‘skill set’ of playworkers. In a playworker’s account below, and in observations of their work in the classroom, it appeared there was seldom time for the playworkers to engage in self-directed professional practice with pupils and to enhance a play space. This led to playworkers’ actions being teacher-initiated and aligned with targeting certain pupils (predominantly male pupils) who were seen to be ‘off task’, disruptive or poorly engaged in formalised learning.

*‘I think when we first started we didn’t know the children so the teacher led us, told us maybe which children to work with or what groups they might want us to focus with but then I found, in my class, ... sometimes I’d go up and ask (the teacher) and try and say, shall I work with him today?’ (Playworker - group interview)*

In the teachers’ interviews, it was suggested that playworkers’ role in the school setting fluctuated between being ‘an extra pair of hands’ or ‘role models, especially for our males, like for the male children’ to ‘get them going (engage, challenge and settle them into class work and was achieved) by having, a physicalness about them, a physical confidence....’ These quotes appear to be a partial conflation of playworkers with teaching assistants and hints at a limited understanding of the history and skill base of playworkers’ expertise.

The quote about 'physical confidence' also potentially reflects policy assumptions that have long been championed in English schools (see Jones 2007), which view male teachers as providing boys with role models. These teachers' thus appear to be drawing on powerful discourses that place value on certain 'masculine traits' in primary schools. That is, the playworkers' physicality and ability to engage children because of their *natural* masculine traits such as their powerful body language, assertiveness and self-confidence (Jones 2007). Mills et al. (2008) highlights, that these discourses valorise particular forms of imaginary male (primary) teachers, '*often constructed as a saviour who will rescue school sport and will act as a disciplinarian with unruly students, in particular boys*' (p80). In the practitioners' accounts below, the female teacher frames the male playworkers as a potential role model for some male pupils who, in many ways, the teachers' appear to be distant from:

*'Yeah, it's definitely more, friendly (now) and I think they're kind of almost role models to them, especially for our male, like for the male children.'* (Teacher - group interview)

*'I think in particular the boys that I was talking about really love football and they have a bit of banter going on about football teams and things.'* (Teacher - group interview)

This emphasis on role models and *banter*, as a display of quick-wittedness and talking plainly, has been theorised as a gendered resource for male bonding (Skelton 2001; Jackson 2003; 2006), which can develop status and rapport (Kehily and Nayak 1997). This was echoed in teachers and playworkers' accounts of identifiable 'successful' practice in the classroom. Such key elements are demonstrated in the quote below:

*'For me there's one boy...I hadn't kind of noticed him so he hadn't stood out as misbehaving and stuff but he was one of the ones that we targeted, or were told to target (by the teacher) because he was misbehaving...I had never met him and then one day he'd had a problem at lunch and he was refusing to come back into class. So I actually said to the teacher: look, shall I just try having a chat with him and like made a joke of it say, we'll have a man to man chat and stuff. So we went, we walked away and went and sat on the stairs by their classroom and had a chat, like talked about what was wrong and what had happened and stuff and he seemed to engage really well and went back into class and was fine... if there was a problem again she would come and get me and say, have one like joke, and...have one of your man-to-man chats.'* (Playworker - group interview)

Through mobilising resources such as '*man to man chats*' and '*banter*', male playworkers are re-

inscribing dominant gendered norms of competitive masculinity. In line with work such as Skelton's (2001; 2003) research on laddish masculinity in primary schools, the targeted boys can 'save' face by demonstrating and trading on their own symbolic masculine cultural capital, which consolidates heterosexual masculinities, and also maintain an 'anti-school' ethic, which pays little heed to the privileging of academic knowledge represented by their (female) teachers. For Batsleer (2014), role-modelling can also become a form of cultural capital that legitimates the status and position of disempowered and marginalised professional practices. Male playworkers' careful deployment of such 'laddish' cultural capital begins to distinguish them from the authority role of the (female) teacher. This was evident by the playworkers' stressing the benefits of having (male) play staff within the classroom:

*'A lot of feedback I get is from teachers having positive male role models in schools. Because I would say, 90% of schools are female led, the teachers and stuff but having a positive male role model, especially with the boys, they say helps a lot'. (Playworker - interview)*

Role-modelling was drawn on by the playworkers to cement claims for professional status and the use of their apparent sporting prowess and knowledge of football was encouraged by teachers in order to build rapport with the disruptive male pupils. Yet such a reification of limited forms of dominant masculinity, potentially casts female staff as Other, and as unable to engage fully with the errant male pupil.

*'..we're quite lucky..., we're kind of an authority figure because we're in the classroom and we can have a chat with them when they're out of line but then we go in there and you, kind of, almost build up a, not friendship, but like a good rapport with them. So I would go in, while I was working with some of the kids, we'd have a little chat about football and stuff because they found out earlier on I was an Arsenal fan...so a lot of the boys in the class were Liverpool fans so we used to joke, come in on a Monday and joke about what happened at the weekend and stuff and so they were still getting on with their work but I don't think you'd ever get a teacher doing that because it would need be like, focus on the work.'*

(Playworker- group interview)

In drawing on the symbolic capital of their knowledge of football and their ability to move between the informal play spaces of the soccer pitch, the playground and the formal classroom, these (male) playworkers' act as flexible and mobile semi-authority figures who can pull pupils back to engage with the perceived feminised 'knowledge' of the female teachers and teaching assistants via deployment of this symbolic gendered power. However, the deployment of this to knowledge also This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Pedagogy, Culture and Society on 27 December 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2017.1421569>.

operated to distort the skill base that playworkers' bring to the classroom. An example of the playworkers' skills base was observed frequently outside of the classroom through imaginative play. A particular skill was their ability to adapt play for the different stages of pupils' learning. In one play session, for example, the playworkers were skilfully modelling play through a board game with pupils who were perceived by teachers to be difficult to teach.

While much of the classroom practice was teacher-led, a playworker was given the freedom to plan the learning of a group of gifted and talented<sup>4</sup> pupils. In doing so, he adopted a 'teacher-like' persona and shifted away from play as a critical approach to promote their learning. His out-of-class activity involved oral storytelling, improvisation and creative writing, which one pupil describes here:

*'We've been planning a story, we've been planning it for quite a while now and we've learnt quite a bit and next week we're going to start our stories but Mr (playworker) said that we can take it in turns, so we're going to go round and Mr going to help us with all of the, with our work, so like we're not doing it on our own'. (Year 4 Pupil - group interview)*

Such an approach saw a subtle shifting and formalising of aspects of playwork away from child-led practice to a more formalised pedagogic approach. Such shifts were also noted in how the playworkers and pupils' addressed each other in the classroom. Playworkers were usually addressed by their first name in out of school activities; however, in the quote above, the pupil's formal use of 'Mr' indicates a more formalised address, which was further reflected on by a playworker:

*'..it also depends on where you are in the school...if you are in the playground, sometimes it's (use of a first name) a bit more informal but when you're in the classroom it's back to the, kind of, school system'. (Playworker- group interview)*

Such subtle shifts suggest that playworkers contingently adopted the school culture in order to carve out a space for legible practice within the constraints of formal schooling. Such shifts in teacher-pupil dynamics and/or adoption of the playwork approach by teachers were not mirrored in observation or interview data. However, the teachers' noted that the playworkers had been a helpful addition and claimed there were direct, if intangible, links between playworker activity and improvements in pupil engagement. That, said, there remained limited parity of co-professional participation and involvement in planning a child's learning in the classroom, beyond that of a male role model.

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'gifted and talented' is itself ambiguous but is used within English school policy for schools to identify pupils with abilities above their age group in academic or practical areas. Schools are tasked to provide more challenging opportunities for children identified as such.

*'Its continued improvement (in pupil engagement)... So, we think that they (playworkers') have had an impact, but we can't pinpoint (it).'* (Teacher - group interview)

Without a clear identifiable 'impact' within the broader school culture, playworkers may become cast as essentialised and essentialising male role models, and not expert professionals, who can 'save' 'laddish' working class masculinities in the classroom. Such an individualised approach also neglects broader structural factors that shape educational disadvantage, and the experiences of male and female pupils alike. Valorising a 'sporty' masculinity as the playworkers' most notable asset, arguably disempowers female teachers, playworkers and other forms of less dominant 'non-sporty' masculinities, and risks emphasising and re-inscribing broader prejudicial gendered discourses back in to daily school life.

## **(ii) Playworker as 'spark plug': Cool and Kind**

Rather than a straightforward 'masculine mystique', as central to the pull of the playworkers' relationships with pupils, the children's accounts suggested it was the playworkers' accessibility and availability that was crucial to developing and building engagement. For example, the pupils' said they enjoyed the time spent and the supportive relationships that they had built up with playworkers, describing them predominantly as 'kind', 'helpful' and 'different' from teaching staff.

*'(Playworkers')... are always nice to us and they help us with our work.'* (Year 4 pupil - group interview)

Fisher (2008) suggests that playworkers have a 'negative capability' or ability to thrive in the doubts and mysteries that exist in liminal spaces. One key inter-professional difference between educational professionals in this study was the playworkers' acceptance of 'not knowing'. Such 'uncertainty' and lack of formal curriculum expertise complicates, temporarily, binary notions of child/ adult, subverts hierarchical notions of knowledge, and echoes aspects of playwork's traditional non-directive approach in practice. This was reflected in both the playworkers' and pupils' accounts:

*'We did French one day and the children tried and asked for my help and my French is terrible ... I said to them(pupils), look my French isn't very good because they weren't expecting us to be, I think they, maybe, expected us to know the answer because I think they just think any adult maybe knows the answer.'* (Playworker - group interview)

Despite playworkers' concerns over a lack of formal curriculum-based knowledge, pupils' accounts recognised the workers' relative lack of curriculum expertise. This 'lack of knowledge' established a potential affinity and rapport, which leads to reciprocal helping and casts the pupil as 'expert' helper. This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Pedagogy, Culture and Society on 27 December 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2017.1421569>.

for 'stuck' adults. The children insightfully note this changing dynamic as a dialogic learning opportunity, which is reflected in the following quotes from the Year 4 group interview:

*'We're still children and we're learning, we're still learning at the moment, so... ... If the playworker gets stuck and you know the answer, you can help them with it.'*

*'Sometimes they (playworkers) have to ask another person if they're right because they might not know everything.'*

Such brief shifts in expert power and adult-child reciprocal learning dynamics were evident in terms of the differences identified from teaching staff, as the playworkers were perceived as '*easier to talk to*', as '*cool*', and '*nice*'. Thus, they operate a much wider repertoire of skills in a broader range of spaces than other adults the pupils encountered in the school. As this playworker describes, they function at a distance from authority that allowed them to be seen by pupils as a trusted intermediary and enables children to recognise a broader range of adult/child relations:

*'we weren't seen as like teachers..., we weren't seen as their (pupils') friends, but we were kind of seen as something in the middle...we've always had, like, children always open up to us and talk to us and stuff, and I think trust that we're not going to necessarily tell them off or go and report things.'*(Playworker - group interview)

The playworkers' lack of perceived authority, lack of specific subject knowledge and distance from teachers, also appear to help spark pupils' involvement in learning with a renewed agency. In short, the playworkers' appear to be what Schudson (1996) calls 'spark plugs' or people who broaden learning, without imposing or demanding any form of oppressive power. By sustaining a 'cool' distance, bonds are founded between playworkers and pupils on understandings of the ineffectiveness of gaining respect through institutional authority; perhaps, in line with the Fraserian concept of misrecognition. Acquiring respect or being 'cool' is an acknowledgement by the pupils that playworkers are fun, nice and able to go with the flow. This acknowledgment springs from a contingent counter-institutional cultural capital rather than a recognised valid institutional status. Whilst being 'cool' provided for mutual recognition and was appreciated by the teachers and pupils; albeit differently, there is a broader question over the long term value and validity of these encounters. It is to these types of issues and questions that we now focus.

## Discussion

The crucial issue from the findings is what does it mean to bring a play specialist into the classroom to support formalised, adult-led learning? The data presented illustrates the potential of a difficult reality for the value of play and playworkers entering a classroom. Whilst playworkers involved in this research were all proficient in the provision of safe spaces for pupils, and the use of play to assist school work, the capacity of playworkers to exceed these opportunities and meet the expectations of playwork were significantly compromised by the formal landscape and inter and intra power dynamics between professionals in the school and the classroom. This suggests that teachers may be unable to recognise and/or utilise the expectations of playwork in an instrumentalised school landscape at the same time as undermining the benefits of play. This is a paradox which raises concerns between playwork in principle and playwork in practice. Unsurprisingly, such a divide on the meaning of play existed within the case study school. There was a tacit acceptance and agreement of the importance of play, hence this pilot project. However, dominant pedagogical approaches remain largely unmoved and centred around adult-led, formalised activities; with child-centred 'play' most often pushed to the margins of the school day and after the real 'work' of the classroom. Misrecognition of this kind runs the risk of leaving playworkers' feeling dejected, humiliated or shamed, especially where the focus is on 'power rituals' such as 'giving and taking orders' (Collins 2004, 112).

Such observations regarding professional cultures, and the disparity of power between occupational groups in inter-professional and interagency collaborations are, of course, not new (Nugus et al. 2011). However, such disparity is most apparent in the nature and purpose of the notion of the male 'role model' and the kinds of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) that are validated and valorised by the staffs' essentialising of sex-gender roles in the classroom. Playworkers', as contextually less powerful practitioners, aligned their professional legitimacy in the classroom with their physicality, gender performances and engagements with perceived 'masculine' and (working) class based pursuits, particularly through sports related talk, such as football related 'banter'.

The misrecognition of playworkers in the classroom is most evident, in the Bourdieuan sense, via the teachers' confusion over their skill set, such as an ability to generate close bonds with pupils through (casual) dress, talk (banter), and acting as trusted intermediaries. What is significant about this skill set is a respect for the contexts and cultural capital in which pupils exist and are familiar, coupled with a distance they put between themselves and perhaps a common-sense construction of teaching staff, who may be viewed by pupils as being middle class, boring, and adults they are obliged to respect. The focus on classroom based practice in the teachers' accounts and a privileging of a particular kind of professional 'teaching' habitus, however, meant that the playworkers' expertise and knowledge of play risks erasure within the classroom. Such confusion led to an ongoing conflation of playwork with



the teaching assistant role as a fellow para-professional with a more legitimised and recognised 'spare pair of hands'. Moreover, the remaining claim to expertise, within the teachers' and playworkers' accounts, was the privileging of individual worker's gendered and classed cultural capital. The playworkers' accounts were especially interesting in their wish to frame themselves of being of 'use' as gendered 'role models' in a formalised, and perceived feminised, school culture.

In a Fraserian sense, misrecognition of the kind evidenced here emerges in the variety of structural issues that arises in this professional and practice terrain. This includes the precarious positioning and hierarchical lowly status and poor pay afforded to feminised 'playwork' and other care based occupations (Osgood 2009; 2010). Such institutional disdain is best highlighted by the disinvestment in funding for play services since 2010 (McKendrick et al. 2015) and, as illuminated in this article, through the marginality of playworkers as play specialists in a contemporary practice climate. This disavowal extends to 'play', which is not currently seen as institutionally important in English schools (Woolley 2015). Without a broader cultural recognition of play and its importance to children's learning, there is unlikely to be acknowledgment of the 'professional' nature and value of playwork.

These findings reveal the need for further research and knowledge brokering, specifically within education and children's settings, if more informed and operational procedures are to be developed in these new post-austerity practice landscapes. This will require policymakers to begin to value the different ways in which children play alongside practitioners in classrooms, including play which may not be comfortable from a formal schooling perspective, but which may be of great interest and value to the children (Lester and Russell 2008). The seemingly chaotic and anarchic qualities of play may be disconcerting and cause primary school teachers to feel a loss of control, yet it is precisely these features that for many define the very nature of play. Lester and Russell make the point that the essence of play flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination (2008, 42), is precisely what makes it of such benefit to children development and well-being. Yet there is also a fine balance to be struck between adult involvement and the adulteration of play. Indeed such play activities may not always neatly fit, and may potentially subvert, the legible and legitimised outcomes in contemporary primary school institutions.

### **Bringing it altogether: some concluding thoughts**

This paper is based on a pilot play project and our claims remain modest. We do however anticipate the findings regarding interprofessional/agency practice, the importance of play, and anxieties regarding the gendering of primary schools, will have broader salience and be recognisable to other professionals working in formal settings beyond this specific local context. We suspect that in relation

to many schools in England, teachers and playworkers' working together in similar field settings will have little or no space or time to bring play centre stage in their own practice, despite evidence that play may well be a fruitful pedagogic strategy for children's learning (Wood and Bennett 1997; NUT 2007; Play England 2007; Matthews et al. 2011). Instead, with few opportunities for play or for teachers to build rapport with pupils during the school day, the gendered bodies of (male) playworkers and their perceived 'masculine' sensibilities may be deployed, as was the case in this pilot project, as a way of 'holding' the attention of pupils' who may disrupt the narrow parameters of measurable primary school success.

The first problem we acknowledge is that such 'holding' does not necessarily easily translate into actions that will produce demonstrable outcomes, neither propel schools into higher positions in the league table, nor straightforwardly, improve exam results. Therefore, the efforts and expertise of the playworker and the experiences and need of pupils for play opportunities risks erasure. The second problem is what this does to the future of playwork as a profession? One strength of modern playwork is its adaptability in developing new responses to fiscal realities in order for playwork to survive. Yet the deployment of casualised playworkers within schools highlights the precarity of the post-austerity child and youth sector. Without due care, this form of diversification to gain funds might further erode claims to a distinct professional identity, or even a particular set of specialised skills and knowledge within formal and other inter-professional settings. Playworkers may become cast as inexpensive, replaceable, and, as evidenced here, casualised teacher aides; tasked to manage the behaviour of perceived 'problem kids', rather than expert advocates and facilitators for play.

The enduring tensions highlighted may be faced by playwork professionals entering primary school classrooms. The challenge is for playworkers, and other para-professionals, to work together in advocating children's rights and the importance of play in formal settings, alongside greater financial and policy investment. It is important for fellow professionals and policy makers to recognise the strengths in play based pedagogies and informal education beyond early years, and thus, diversifying notions of 'success' beyond the instrumental within formal schooling. However, while current preoccupations within English education policy and funding focus on that of consumer 'choice' through free schools, academies, and academic selection, such a reframing of 'success' across education and children's services may take longer than peripheral professional traditions and organisations can survive in any recognisable form.

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